

What Resources Do Employers REALLY Need When Hiring and Retaining an Employee
with a Disability?

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Employment is NOT a program, Employment is an OUTCOME. Employment is the result of effective supports and services.” “Employment First” is an initiative that means competitive employment in the general workforce is the first and preferred post education outcome for people with any type of disability. It presumes that people with disabilities can and should work. It provides a fundamental change in philosophy, policy, and resources related to employment of people with disabilities (“APSE Statement on Employment First,” n.p.). My goal is to provide employers with useful, simple research-based information, so they will willingly hire and naturally support their employees with disabilities.

I have been supporting the employment of individuals with disabilities for eleven years. During that time, I have found that once given the opportunity to work, the students have thrived. I know there is research to support how to train students (through job sampling, exposure, community-based instruction), and indeed, there are several schools and agencies providing good practices to support this philosophy as well. But, in addition to that, I have witnessed natural co-workers becoming leaders, training and supporting our students with disabilities at the workplace, and the overall moral benefits of this experience as well. It is *this* information that I am very interested in exploring further. I want to share candid stories from employers, to share their perspective, to provide solid, user-friendly guidelines and information for employers, so people are more comfortable with the idea of employing individuals with developmental and sensory disabilities, including those that are blind and visually impaired. I want to make the

initial process less daunting and more inviting so we can have a better rate of a successful first impression and long-term outcomes.

While job developing, I have had countless experiences cold-calling and networking to establish a partnership with a business. I have been told, “No”, more times that I have been given the opportunity on behalf of the students I support. For all those people who have said, “no”, in my heart, I knew the unknown was easier to turn down. I also admittedly know it was because my delivery was not effective. Looking back, I did not have enough research to support this concept. I knew that employers must have felt like there was “a catch”. Truthfully, I knew people were not saying, “no” to be mean. Maybe some of these employers were contemplated saying, “Yes”, but were either too embarrassed or reluctant to ask questions to support what they *really* needed to know. Often times, people are afraid to say the “wrong” thing.

Let me tell you about a story of a successful partnership. For the past 6 years, I have worked with Sodexo at The College of New Jersey. Sodexo is an international company, committed to improving the quality of daily life through their retail and dining services. To be honest, it took me a solid 8 months to secure a position for a student with them successfully. (As many job developers reading this can relate, that timeframe is not at all unusual.) Through my experience, I have found that initiating a new employer partner often takes anywhere between 6-9 months before beginning. Since I was never told, “no”, I kept working my way around to contacting different personnel within the company until I was able to physically talk to the General Manager. Once we finally met, we discussed some details. I was honest with him, and made it clear that I would be set up a dependable support for his staff to take on this endeavor. That day, he

introduced me to several managers, and he opened up the doors to several departments on campus. Before long, the student-workers (with disabilities) proved their skills and quickly became a part of the Sodexo team. Since then, I have witnessed many students of all skill levels to be dependable, productive trainees and employees of Sodexo, naturally supported by their colleagues with additional job coach follow-along support.

“Ms. Vicki” is a Sodexo cashier and runs the coffee cart in the student center and has worked at the college for over 30 years. When I first supported a student in the student center food court, the manager naturally asked Ms. Vicki to lend a hand when needed. After all, she did have the most experience. This type of scenario is very common in my line of work. Even though “getting our foot in the door” takes managers’ approval, it is usually the front line workers that provide the day-to-day support and training. It did not take long for me to notice that Ms. Vicki was a leader. She was so inspired to teach my student. She was patient. She was kind. She was not a special education teacher, nor did she ever receive formal training. She saw potential and a person motivated to work, just like you and me.

Through the support of the manager and Ms. Vicki, I was able to fade from the student being dependent on my support. The student quickly became confident and fulfilled the tasks well, and independently. When there was a question, the student felt comfortable to ask Ms. Vicki for clarification. When there a change in the daily routine, Ms. Vicki reached out, as she would to any colleague. By default, Ms. Vicki became more than co-worker, she was a friend, as many of us have relationships with the people we work with.

The student worked with Sodexo during her education at The College of New Jersey, and because she lived across the country outside of college, she finished her experience at the end of her final semester. Attending any of the graduation ceremonies of our four-year program for students with disabilities, it is always filled with mixed emotions. On this particular graduation day, it was especially heartfelt. In the back of the room where the ceremony took place, there was Ms. Vicki, with a bouquet of flowers in hand. I noticed she was not there in her Sodexo uniform either. I later learned, that she requested for the day off months prior, something she seldom did in her 30+ years of service, just to attend this special graduation ceremony. Supported employment of people with disabilities cannot get much more genuine and beautiful than that.

Over the past year, I was asked to provide some techniques and strategies to Sodexo national leadership team, so they can begin making these partnerships with other public and private schools and programs that support employment for people with disabilities. It is always refreshing to hear when an employer is engaging in these conversations. They wanted to learn what is politically correct, appropriate and relevant. I was enthusiastic when they invited me to their National Conference regarding supporting their colleagues who are veterans as well as with disabilities. The audience was made up of general managers and executives across the country. There they had inspiring motivational speakers and panelists talking about the benefits of hiring veterans and people with disabilities, including the details of new regulations coming up this year. At the end of the day, they had made time for Questions and Answers. One manager, bravely stood up and asked, "I am ALL in. I WANT to do this, I really want to do this in my facility. Where do I begin? And once I hire one person. How am I going to know

what to do for that person??” I felt like I just wanted to jump up and hug him! I know he was not the only person feeling that way, and unfortunately, the moderators did not really answer his questions. Half-heartedly, the woman fielding the questions said, “that’s why we are friends with The College of New Jersey to help us with that.” As much as I felt excited inside because I feel like I really DO know the “right” things to do, and the effective ways to make this a reality. I felt overwhelmed because I knew I did not have the research readily available to back up each idea. I have snip-its and stories to share how we can teach, train and provide insight for their employees to be just like Ms. Vicki. But, I feel like I needed more clarification, more validity. This course came at a perfect time in my career. The more I thought about my conference with Sodexo, and the more I self-reflected on how I wanted to embark on my researching endeavors, the more this solidified my topic: conducting research to improve the information content and delivery for employers interested in hiring and naturally supporting individuals with sensory and complex disabilities.

In everyday life, we are often defined by what we do for a living. When we get together for BBQs or with family members for the holidays, it is common to ask, “How’s work?” or to school-age children, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” It is important that people with disabilities are a part of those conversations and by employing people with disabilities, that they will have answers to those questions (“APSE Statement on Employment First,” n.p.).

In today’s society, there are several mandates with federal policies and laws that support the hiring of people with disabilities. However, I am often left with an empty feeling inside when I approach community employers in the hopes to partner with my

program to train, and essentially hire young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities including those are additionally blind and visually impaired. I never feel like I have “enough” to persuade them that I am bringing them a great future employee to their team, probably one of the most dedicated, respectful employees they have ever had. Even though, I have found that there is a significant amount of research that provides information regarding equal opportunities, there is very little information that provides the know-how; once the individuals are hired. Information such as, “How does an employer successfully support and retain an employee with a disability?” It is important to provide these details for employers so they can be proactive and not reactive to the laws around this topic. In special education, there has been a significant amount of growth to improve the independence of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. These individuals are being taught to be more self-directed, and to have high expectations; to set career goals. I also feel equally responsible as a special educator, to provide community employers with user-friendly information to bridge the conversations and reality that people with disabilities are capable, productive employees when given the appropriate supports; just as any other employee candidate.

Supported employment is based on the principle that individuals with disabilities have the right to be employed by community businesses where they can earn comparable wages, work side-by-side with co-workers with or without disabilities, and experience all of the same benefits as other employees of the company (“APSE Statement on Employment First,” n.p.). Since, I support a unique population of individuals: young adults with both developmental disabilities with blindness/visual impairment, I wanted to collect information that would highlight their contributions and effectiveness at the

workplace. I understand that even though they have this right to work, it is not always the reality. I want to provide employers with resources in a comprehensible format, making the consideration of hiring such a candidate to be less invasive and more beneficial for all parties involved.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Article 1: Self-Directed Support: Impact of Hiring Practices on Adults with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Families

Self-direction promotes personal choice and control over the delivery of waiver and state plan services, including who provides services and how services are provided (Heller, Arnold, Heumen, McBride & Factor, 2012).

For us, it almost comes second-nature, but I was surprised to hear that this is such a new concept for most states. I was particularly interested the positive affects of this approach, so I can make it more clear to employers that interest and opinions matter, including those of people with disabilities. Often times, people with intellectual and developmental disabilities are perceived as passive and when decision-making has occurred, instead of looking at a more person-centered approach, we (special educators, employers and families alike) have erred on the side of being more safe and cautious to protect the individual; not always valuing the individuals opinions, preferences, and interests first. With this new model, this study proved that the flexibility in hiring staff (including family) improved the ability to express interest and make individualized choices, as well as increasing involvement in the community.

This study focused on participants in Illinois, with various disabilities. Although the study described this as a limitation, I did not find it discouraging that it was an exclusive study for one state because I have learned that each state adopts their own policies. This topic was appealing to me because NJ is in the midst of transitioning to a new model; fee-for-service, outlining just what they are proved in this article: when individuals have a greater sense of control over the people providing their services, they have had more favorable outcomes in terms of the community activities they are participating in as well as the positive impact on employment.

A common question for New Jersey consumers with disabilities is similar to the question raised in this article: Is it ethical to pay personal support workers if they are a parent, sibling, other relative, or friend? The study indicated that there were not known negative impacts of hiring family members. In fact, they proved the contrary. Often times, in my experiences with employer-individual relationships, I have found the employer becomes naturally invested in their employees' "situation". It is a very people-to-people things to do. A good employer provides accommodations. For example, a flexible start/end time would provide the individual the access to utilize public transportation or Access Link, a door-to-door transportation service for individuals with disabilities, provided by NJ Transit. Although this service promotes independence, it is not a perfect system for many of their consumers. At times, there may be miscommunication with drivers, or they be late (ie. Traffic, etc.), and whatever the case may be, there is no way to contact the individual waiting for the ride. Unfortunately, it has been the only systematic form of transportation. As you can imagine, this causes unnecessary stress for the individual, and for the employer. In those cases where this

form of transportation is not the best match, the concept of hiring a friend, family member, etc. would be a win-win-win!

Article 2: Employing Individuals with Disabilities

“Individuals with disabilities can be a valuable asset to a business’s bottom line, and hiring them has proven benefits in the business culture,” (Mackell, 2013). This statement reeled me in. But, I was more intrigued to learn, “What are the benefits?” from a leaders’ perspective. Jack Mackell, the Governor of Delaware has taken such a public stance on this topic. He created a policy topic to put people in DE back to work, including people with disabilities: A Better Bottom Line: Employing People with Disabilities. He genuinely outlines that states should be doing all that they can to empower people with disabilities to achieve their full potential.

“It isn’t just the right thing to do, it’s the smart thing to do.” According to the Governor, large, high-skilled companies have shared how important it is to employ people with disabilities because the diversity is critical to innovation and understanding their consumer base. Employers who “get it”, their productivity has increased, and their safety has improved. He closed his statements with three lasting impressions:

1. Employers don’t care about labels, they care about skills.
2. Benefit in their bottom line, improvement in their culture.
3. The path forward is of shared responsibility.
 - a. Veterans are returning with disabilities
 - b. Individuals on the autism spectrum are being more accurately diagnosed
 - c. Employers should not be scared, they should embrace

Article 3: Employers' perceptions of the benefits of workplace accommodations: Reasons to hire, retain and promote people with disabilities.

The Job Accommodation Network, www.askjan.org, is funded by the US Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, and was initiated to support employers and people with disabilities to receive information on successfully accommodating them at the workplace. The research was based on the information collected from employers who utilize JAN as a resource. This article provides reasons to not only hire, but retain and promote people with disabilities. Although it not a good representation of all employers who hire people with disabilities, it still provides valid information and insight to their perspective of the process.

Employers express concern regarding the culture of the workplace. Even though it may be the "right" thing to do, the workplace may have personnel with discriminatory issues. I actually could not believe I saw this in writing. I have witnessed this SO many times in my career. It is true. Often times, the positions of our individuals are competitive to other employees'. Sometimes, people feel belittled or degraded (at first) when it comes time to fulfilling the work tasks. I teach the people I support to earn their keep. Through actions, and completing the work well, following the "Golden Rule, and practicing a good work ethic, they will be respected just as any good employee would be. Another concern employers shared was providing accommodations and the ability to perform the task. Even though there are laws around this, it is still very unclear to the employer, "But, how?" First issue, the cost. In most cases the accommodations are as little as \$1-\$500. Also, often times if an accommodation is made for one individual, it will most likely positively affect other employees. The second issue, job performance. In most cases of this study, the employees with disabilities not only had comparable or

better production, but they were documented to be punctual, reliable and conscientious—any company’s “bottom line”.

I learned what employers want to hear! Small companies found that information about satisfactory job performance was most persuasive when hiring, while larger companies were more interested in research and statistics. Employers were asked to disclose direct and indirect benefits both in forced question and open-ended surveys. This was really helpful for me, as I continue to prepare for my research plan. I am really looking forward to interviewing and surveying current employer partners, for tips and perspectives. I sincerely found this article inspiring and helpful, but I am still in the search for research to answer the question, “How?”

Article 4: Employment for persons with disabilities: Where we are now and where do we need to go?

The introduction of this article, accurately describes the support needed for an individual to work (successfully). Furthermore, it provides a realistic description of the “other” questions that people with disabilities face such as, “Is there an internship that I can find that will help me? Will I be stuck in the same job for the rest of my life? Will I have to go to an adult activity center??”

Even though adult day placements may be the only viable match for some individuals, competitive employment is the first career option for most individuals with and without disabilities.

The article outlines meaningful explanations of why we (Americans) work. First, “Work is a way of human life in the United States. We are often defined by what we do. Work also enhances other skills such as communication, socialization, academics,

physical health and community skills. Most importantly, work is good because it is a normal feature of what people in our society do and how they are perceived.” These comments validated my personal philosophy and introduction, exactly. Next, there are several federal laws that support employment for people with disabilities. Third, work promotes the greatest amount of economic well-being. Granted, people with disabilities, may need a financial advisor to help juggle some of their other income programs around, but in the end, competitive work will only improve their economic situation. Fourth, it’s essential to have a “first job”, but it is important to look into greater opportunities for advancement and improvement. In turn, this will promote a great sense of self-worth.

Why should companies hire people with disabilities? This article described four concise reasons: with appropriate supports and tasks in place, businesses now have outstanding employees. Second, the public is partial to people who support those with disabilities. Next, often times, companies, suppliers, and customers have youth or adults with disabilities. And, lastly, most companies are “good stewards in the community”. This is a very similar approach to their responsibility to the community.

Article 5: Employer Attitudes towards Persons who are Blind or Visually Impaired: Perspectives and Recommendations from Vocational Rehabilitation Personnel.

According to the article, many employers find it more difficult to hire people who are blind and visually impaired compared to other disabilities, with the exception of people with developmental disabilities. I did choose this article, because the individuals I support have both intellectual disabilities as well as visual impairments. There is a lot of literature on the importance of the Vocational Rehabilitation services to establish relationships with employers.

Specifically, good VR counselors stressed the strategies that are most effective to establish relationships with employers. The study was part of a larger research endeavor looking into VR agencies businesses. They surveyed the VR agencies, and I found it the “Discussion” of this article the most eye-opening. They found that it was the VR agencies that were most negative about the employers’ perspectives on hiring. In my experiences, I find the same to be true. The conclusion of this article indicated the improvement of interactions between VR agencies and employers. Although, there were some strengths to the information disclosed regarding the implications of employers’ beliefs, I found that there were weaknesses in the policies that are in place for VR agencies. The agencies reported their effective strategies that work with employers, but why are there so many loop-holes?

Research Questions

In my research, I have found useful, consistent, information regarding *why* people with disabilities should be hired, and the positive effects it has on the community, as well

as the employer. I have also walked away with a better understanding of how to approach employers, when disclosing the long-term benefits. As I expected, I am still left with unanswered questions, like, “What strategies work best?” Or, “How will this affect my other employees. In my career, I have found informal answers to these questions through experience and observations. However, this is what inspired me to investigate more on this topic of supported employment:

What resources do employers REALLY need when hiring and retaining an employee with a disability? How can I effectively support employers to feel more comfortable about hiring and retaining their employees with disabilities?



III. METHODOLOGY

a. Participants

In my line of work, my “classroom” is not necessarily in a school, but in businesses within the community. It is there that I teach students with developmental and sensory disabilities, including those that are blind and visually impaired, work skills and soft skills in real-life work environments.

Over the past eleven years, I have developed relationships with thirty-four employers in a variety of environments and fields, both small and corporate companies. The participants I surveyed for this study were those community employer partners who have trained and/or hired students (young adults varying in ages 16-25 with developmental and/or sensory disabilities) that I have supported, , including those that are blind or visually impaired. I received twenty-one anonymous responses to my survey. I selected three employers to interview further, in three different genres of employment: office, retail and dining services.

Lastly, I took photographs of students working in the natural work environments, so I did require photo releases before they participated in that capacity.

b. Types of Data Collected

- i. Research: In addition to my literature review, I have found other programs across the country, that have really good perspectives on supportive employment. Also, each state has its own set of policies and procedures that support individuals (ie. Transportation, supported employment agencies, etc.) Looking into statewide specific systems, this will help me to share with employers an understanding of the support that exists, in a user-friendly format.

- ii. Observations and Photographs: I had the opportunity to observe some students with disabilities in their current internship or work placements, as well as their interactions with customers, co-workers, and bosses. I also was able to take photographs of the student employees working in natural work environments. I believe that pictures speak a thousand words. Sometimes, it is difficult for people in the community to *picture* individuals with such complex disabilities to be gainfully employed.
- iii. Journal Reflection: I used my journal as a tool to document my motivation and inspiration for doing this, as well as my insecurities. Once I began receiving surveys, it validated for me that there was a need for this information for employers, from employers.
- iv. Surveys: I generated a survey to document the perspectives and insight from current employers of people with disabilities. I had initially intended to make it concise, but instead I decided to ask questions in a different formats. I wanted to maximize the amount of perspectives I could receive while I had such a large audience. I asked nine questions, and the two optional final open-ended that gave them an outlet to share candid stories and advice.
- v. Interview: I first thought I thought the interviews would help me generate the survey questions. However, due to scheduled (inclement weather) I disseminated the surveys first. This turned out to be more productive because I was able to ask some follow-up questions, based on the survey responses as a whole.

c. Data Analysis Procedures

I did a lot of planning before preparing my survey questions for the employers. Actually, just as I utilized the information I learned from my participation in an employment conference to encourage my research, I purposefully registered for and attended the annual New Jersey APSE (American Persons for Supported Employment) Conference in March, to help give me the most current perspective when I began to analyze my data.

In this study, I collected five types of data to help me provide appropriate resources to support the different viewpoints of employers who hire and support employees with disabilities. The data I collected came from observations and photographs, employer surveys, employer interviews, and my motivation journal. The survey included questions with a variety of ways to respond: Multiple Choice, Likert Scale, Ranking Scale, and two optional open-ended questions. All questions responses were anonymous. The Multiple choice questions were asked to gather their status and experience of working with an employee with a disability. Additionally, they were asked to share their challenges and concerns of the support required to successfully retain an employee with a disability. I also asked them to *Select All That Apply* in response to the questions regarding their feelings before they had experience and after, as well as who they would typically solicit resources in successfully supporting their employee with a disability. The Likert Scale questions outlined why they (their company) chose to hire or train a person with a disability, their understanding and support of the concept referred to as, Customized Employment. Lastly, the employers were asked to Rank the level of

importance of current resources/supports available when successfully supporting a person with a disability.

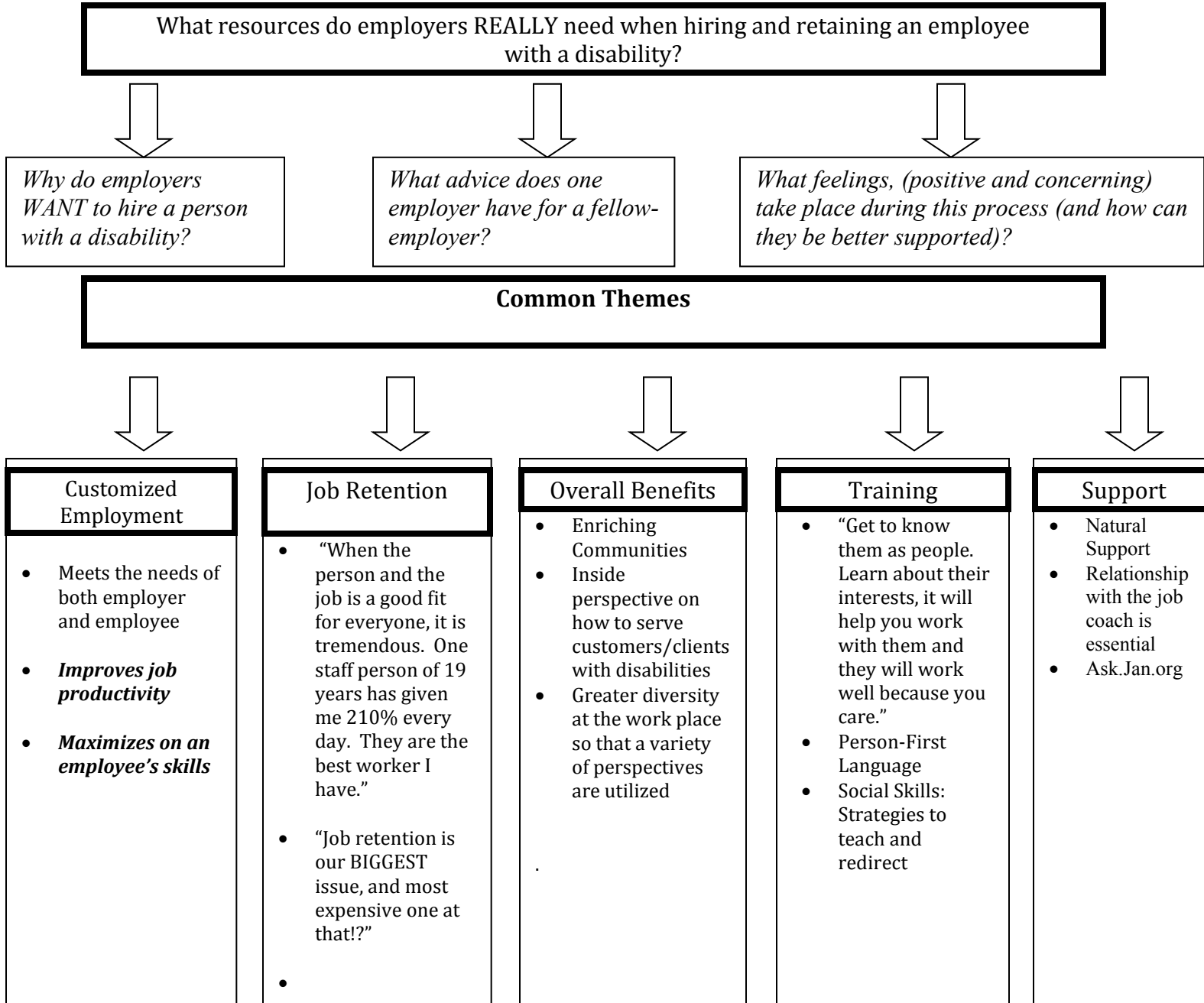
The majority of data was collected in the Employer Surveys, however additional questions were asked during interviews. I selected three employers from diverse settings: Office, Dining Services, and Retail to expand on some of their perspectives. Two of these meetings were in person, and one was over the phone. We spent about a half hour talking about the different scenarios. The manager of the office actually supports several employees with disabilities. We did discuss the lack of support employers' felt from other agencies providing similar services. This helped me understand their frustrations.

My focus question was to help me find some concrete information to share with employers, from a different perspective; to help break away from employers feeling pitty and obligated (or commonly, uncomfortable and resentful) to hire a person with developmental and sensory disabilities, including those that are blind and visually impaired. From there, I came up with four sub-topic questions: *“How effective is Customized Employment? Why do employers WANT to hire a person with a disability? What advice does one employer have for a fellow-employer? What feelings, both positive and concerning, take place during this process (and how can they be better supported)?* I was able to embed these sub-topic questions into my survey questions, in more user-friendly language. Once I read the responses, I then pulled the common themes from the information, and found that five commonalities were emphasized more often than others: *Customized Employment, Job Retention, Overall Benefits, Training, and Support.* Additional open-ended responses provided candid advice for fellow-employers.

IV. FINDINGS

The ultimate goal of my research was to be able to relate to employers better, to address their needs, and provide them with the resources (the confidence and the know-how) of successful ways to support their employees with disabilities. After reading publications related to the trends in transition from high school to adult life, and supported employment, I was able to learn the current best practices. Once I read the article, *Employing People with Disabilities* by the Governor of Delaware, I realized that I needed to conduct this study with a different approach. He publicly address that employers are hiring people with disabilities because it meets their bottom line. I was so inspired by this comment, that I did further research on him. About a year ago, The Public Broadcasting Network (PBS) did an exclusive interview with him on on the topic of why employers should hire folks with disabilities. During that interview he made a comment stating that, “We need to get the CEO’s of companies to talk with fellow CEO’s of companies,” and that “they need to share why this is working for them, and why this is meeting their bottom line.” Like any industry, when you are in the field, the jargon becomes second-nature. In the field of supported employment, the community businesses are also our colleagues. In most cases, you cannot expect the community to speak the same language as those of us that are support services. I needed to come up with a way for employers to have those conversations with other employers; help break down barriers and explore ways that they can feel more comfortable with employing people with disabilities.

Table 1. Themes within Supported Employment Resources



a. Customized Employment

According to the US Department of Labor, Customized Employment is a process through which the relationship between employer and employee is negotiated and personalized in a way that meets the needs of both. As a creative, flexible and voluntary process, Customized Employment allows employers and employees the opportunity to overcome obstacles by negotiating individual tasks and/or reassigning basic duties, with the ultimate goal being improved overall workplace productivity. Customized Employment works because it is not a program but a set of universal principles and strategies specifically designed to support both sides of the labor force: Supply and Demand (“Disability Employment Policy: A Case for Customized Employment,” n.d.)

Out of the 21 employers surveyed, 16 of them felt that customized employment was effective in that it met the employers’ needs, and 14 agreed that it met the individuals’ needs as well. One of the surveyed employers shared this advice: “Get to know them. Take the time with them and the job coach in the beginning. They are there because they are motivated to work. After time, you may realize that they have another set of strengths that may match your other needs.” Another employer (J. Paterson, personal communication, March 8, 2014) reiterated in an interview that “It must be a good fit for the employer as well as the person with a disability.”

My most fond example of customized employment took place at Wegmans. There, I was supporting a young man with a developmental disability as he fulfilled his typical responsibilities in the prepared foods department. Because he had been successful employed there for a few months, I had already made the relationship with the personnel

at that store. They approached me because they had a need. One of the responsibilities of a cashier is to “condition” the shelves at the end of their shift. This meant to remove damaged goods, make sure products were in the correct locations, and all items had to be brought to the front of the shelves. They were interested in removing this responsibility from the cashiers so that they can provide better customer service at the register and asked if I knew of any individuals that would work well with those tasks. I matched them up with the ideal candidate, and she has been employed at the Fortune 100 Company for eleven years (and counting)!

b. Job Retention

“When the person and the job is a good fit for everyone, it is tremendous. One staff person of 19 years has given me 210% every day. They are the best worker I have.” This is just a snapshot of what employers are saying about their employees with disabilities. When recently meeting with a CFO of major retail grocery store, I shared with him that job retention was just one of the benefits of employing a person with a disability. Before I could elaborate, he interjected and said, “you know, job retention is our BIGGEST issue, and most expensive one at that!?” It was that moment that validated the need for hiring people with disabilities in community work places; they are generally loyal people and are proudly defined by their part-time or full-time job, just like the rest of society (Personal Communication, April 7, 2014). An office manager (J. Paterson, March 8, 2014) spoke about the dedication of her two employees with disabilities. She laughed and said, “I have to FORCE them to use their vacation time! When it’s a snow

day, and I want to call out myself, I know I can't because every one of my employees will find a way to be there.”

c. Overall Benefits

It is important for me to create a “win-win” for the employers and for the employee with a disability. The individual with a disability is gainfully employed, socializing and truly taking part in their community. The employer is receiving a qualified, dependable employee to meet their needs. However, this study gave me further understanding (and confidence) that there are more benefits than that. Because of these findings, I can share with employers how their involvement with schools and agencies supporting employment for people with disabilities will impact their community. I have had the opportunity to work closely with companies and seeing the benefits first-hand. Since my partnership with Sodexo inspired this research endeavor, I feel proud to share their mission statement which includes that they “aspire to enrich the communities that they are in”. Employing people with disabilities provides greater diversity at the work sites. This way, a wide variety of viewpoints are utilized and gives them an inside perspective on how to serve customers/clients with disabilities. It is without a doubt that communities are enriched because of businesses hiring people with disabilities. This allows them to naturally communicate with their customers with disabilities that they are accepting.

Lastly, and not least important, employers are eligible for tax incentives. According to the survey, about half of the employers were unaware of this benefit so I think it is important to be upfront about those details. Ironically, at the recent APSE conference I attended, one of the presenters said that she downloads the Workers Opportunity Tax

Credit (WOTC) paperwork from the United States Department of Labor website, and puts them in folders for her employers. (I gladly will use that tip.) When made readily available, it alleviates us (job developers) from feeling like we have to become experts on the topic, and if they are interested in those benefits they can explore them.

d. Training

In my experiences, according to the survey and during my interviews with the employers, they shared that they were initially nervous to begin this relationship because they were afraid to say the “wrong” thing. In today’s world, we are more aware to be politically correct. Several employers gave advice to treat them like you would anyone else on your team.

- “ If there is a uniform required, supply the uniform and hold them accountable to wear it properly. If they don’t —enforce the company policy; just as you would anyone else. If need be, send them home for that shift, just as you would anyone else. I guarantee they will not forget that uniform again. If we don’t treat them the same, are we are not helping them, we’re enabling them. We want them to be responsible. They have the same potential.”
- “Get to know them as people. Learn about their interests, it will help you work with them and they will work well because you care.”

We are all a person first. It is important to dedicate time to talk with them as people. Person-First Language is the language used to describe people with disabilities. It puts emphasis on the person and not the disability, for example, you would not say, “He is a stutter.” You would say, “He is a person who stutters.” It is important to provide employers with these everyday skills (“Disability Employment Policy: Communicating with and About People with Disabilities,” n.d.).

Also, 18 out of the 21 responses also indicated that the employers' biggest area of concern was addressing or redirecting the individual's social skills. There are many tools to teach our students the soft skills essential for successful employment. I would like to continue to explore this topic and strategize ways to provide employers with the techniques needed to do this naturally and consistent.

e. Support

Several of the employers talked about the importance of establishing natural support when giving advice to fellow-employers. Using their current employees as mentors has been invaluable.

- “Consider your employee with a disability as a part of the team from the first day and your other employees will as well. If you treat him any differently, everyone else will resent them.”
- I found it helpful to get my current staff on the same page, let them know what is going on in regards to setting up support. I cannot tell you how much of my staff stepped up to the plate and offered support. They genuinely love this aspect of our job.”

Also, like most new staff, our people with disabilities need initial training, and then they can be productive independently with on-going follow-along support by their job coach. Follow-along services are in place to provide on-going training and support for the employees with disabilities and to remain in contact with the employer to foster the relationship (“APSE Statement on Employment First,” n.p.). According to the survey, 17 out of 21 employers seek support from the job coach, and 100% of those surveyed felt it was essential to make a relationship with the job coach to seek support when needed. The amount of time the follow-support fades when the individual becomes more

independent, and varies based on the individuals' needs. In some occasions the employee with a disability may need accommodations. 18 of the 21 employers surveyed felt that fellow employers should know how to access accommodations when needed. Often times, accommodations are free, for example a checklist of tasks if the job is not consistent throughout the shift. This type of example is another reason why it is beneficial for employers to take advantage of the job coach supporting the individual. Creating accommodations like this is the job coach's expertise. Because the majority of employers indicated the importance of Accommodations to successfully support the individuals to fulfill their job, I want to be sure to make them aware of the Job Accommodation Network, AskJan.org, a service of the Office of Disability Employment Policy. JAN provides free, confidential technical assistance about job accommodations and the Americans with Disabilities Acts (ADA) (Hartnett, Stuart, Thurman, Loy, Batiste, 2011).

Lastly, and most importantly, 100% of the employers surveyed felt that making the relationship with the job coach was either extremely important/important amongst the listed resources to support an employee with a disability. Like all successful relationships, it needs to be based on trust, respect, communication and commitment. It is essential for the job coaches to make these opportunities happen, but it is just as important for employers to know they are supported on this community endeavor. As a job coach, the last thing you want to hear is that "the job isn't working out". With open-communication and effective problem-solving, you can help defuse a situation. It is imperative to have an open relationship with employers too. You want to be

approachable, and reflective, on behalf of your employee with a disability. Every moment can be a teachable one.

I interviewed three employers, to get more detail on their perspectives. One manager shared that she valued the partnership with the school district first. There, she was able to train the student as an intern. Then, if it was not a match, she felt like she taught him some skills to apply in another work environment. When it was a match, it was a “win-win”. She recommended that if the opportunity was there for other employers to partner with schools running internship programs, it is an easy way to explore supported employment to see if it really is a value to your company. I also asked her to share how we should “get the word out” to other employers, to make this be easy as possible for them, understanding that there are still some obvious barriers in the way. She laughed and said, “you need to be the person that meets with all of them!” I was intrigued to ask some of the employers I interviewed how they felt when they initially began working with one of my students. I asked the employers how they initially felt when first approached with the idea of hiring or working with a person with a disability. Like most people without experience with socializing or working with this population, the majority felt nervous and reluctant, but inspired. Then, I asked them how they feel now, and the majority shared, inspired and proud.

I reviewed the open-ended advice for those asked to hire or train a person with the disability. Here is what they had to say:

- *“Be yourself.”*
- *“Be patient.”*
- *“Be clear in your expectations (and directions).”*
- *“Be consistent.”*
- *“Be open-minded.”*
- *“Have a sense of humor!”*

These remarks are just a few of the statements I received that consistent with others, simple and concise. For me, they were easy for others to relate to, but they have inspired me to dive deeper. These responses supported my research and encouraged me to learn more. Employers need to know just how simple and holistic successfully employing a person with a disability really can be. A manager of several employees with disabilities, disclosed in her open-ended survey response, “You will probably find that you will learn more from your employee than from what you are trying to teach them. It could be one of the most rewarding things you do in your career; it has been in mine.”

V. IMPLICATIONS (What my findings mean)

“Use a lot of the same tools you would with any other one of your employees— Training, communication and honest feedback.” That is what one employer said when asked what advice she would give to a fellow-employer who just hired someone with a disability and was unsure of what strategies to use when supporting their new employee with a disability. At first, I was afraid these types of remarks would humble my research efforts. In fact, it did just the opposite. Without realizing it, every employer provided responses that could not have been more genuine, and accurate to the information that I was looking for: what the employers REALLY need to know. The best part, it came directly from fellow employers. They share a similar, if not the same perspective. That said, this research still implies that that employees (even the most seasoned, experienced employees) still feel that they need support, especially to redirect the social skills of their employees with disabilities.

Supporting a person with a disability to be gainfully employed can be challenging. But, that is not the most difficult task of this process. Through my experiences of working with employers, they often shut down because they have not been supported properly in the past or worse yet, a relationship was never made with the job coach. Because people with disabilities often need support regarding their social skills or accommodations, employers have been left with no one to turn to. The problem then builds up, and eventually, the employee is let go. With the appropriate supports in place, the employer should feel comfortable contacting the job coach when the employee is learning a new task, or when the social skills are not meeting their expectations. This research also solidified that this “word” needs to get out, that it should be expected and clearly and comfortably communicated *what* support comes along with hiring a person with a disability, and *how* to access it when necessary.

IV. LIMITATIONS

Although, I feel that I received some consistent, concrete data, I am aware that my relationship with the employment partners may have influenced the results. Even though the surveys were anonymous, they did know that I would be analyzing all responses, so they may have been reluctant to share any negative, honest feedback. Looking back at the survey questions, I could have been even more objective, instead of crafting the questions to information I was wanting to hear. Perhaps employers had their concerns. Yes, I did leave opportunities to write in “other” comments in most categories, but

because each question lead to the next, they may not have felt as compelled to be as honest.

If I were to continue this endeavor, I would surely be interested in improving the survey by creating the questions with a team of job developers to help share our perspective. Then, I would be interested in disseminating it to a larger pool of employers, especially those that I have not personally worked with in the past. I am certain that my positive relationship impacted the results, and I would interested to hearing from employers that have had a variety of experiences in hiring and retaining their employees with disabilities.

VII. EMERGING QUESTIONS

My findings provided me answers to support my broad questions, but inspired me to explore deeper in the subtopic questions, especially the benefits of Customized Employment and the training necessary for employers to feel comfortable naturally supporting their employees with disabilities. By researching more about the benefits of Customized Employment, employers may be more likely to hire a person with a disability to fulfill their need. Employers may be already doing this by maximizing on their employees' skills both with and without disabilities, and I think this creative aspect of employment needs to become more common to truly create the ultimate benefit for both employers and people with disabilities aspiring to work.

Even though this study has helped me improve my relationship with employers and to address their needs, first and foremost, I am left with some emerging questions and feel inspired to continue a follow-up study.

- First, my sub-question regarding Customized Employment can be researched deeper. I am interested in knowing the variety of tasks and in what ways have they benefited employers.
- How can this information reach employers; to motivate them to hire as well as to improve their relations and practices with their current employees with disabilities? For example, should this be attractively compiled in a handbook?
- In my mission to provide employers with resources, it made me more aware that we are still responsible to teach our employee candidates better social skills, and perhaps different social skills, to answer employers' questions.
- School districts are beginning to effectively transition their students with disabilities to adulthood, by creating work training programs. What resources can do they need to communicate with employers about their efforts to create mutually effective experience?

VIII. CONCLUSION

Until now, I have always felt that I rely on my own intuitions. Not only did understanding the employers' perspective empower me with more confidence when I am in the field of job developing, but it provided me with information of how to better

prepare our students with disabilities to be more successful employees. There are four essential concepts that evolved from this study.

- Employers often initially feel uncomfortable or nervous when first hiring or training a person with a disability.
- It is crucial for job coaches to make the relationship with the employers first.
- Create a win-win opportunity. It should be clear what benefits apply to the employers (as well as the person with a disability). For example, job retention? Productivity? Diversity? How is this employment process affecting the employers Bottom Line.
- It is essential that employers feel comfortable communicating with their employees with disabilities. When they feel comfortable, it will likely have the ripple-effect, to every employee, to every customer, client or personnel in that building.

Supporting employment for people with disabilities is a natural, holistic approach; when everyone is involved, it becomes a part of an average day of work. In my advocacy-type role of empowering people with disabilities with their right to work and highlighting their skills to work, I understand that I am biased. I have worked with a variety of employers (personalities and leadership styles), in very different environments. Although, they have hired or trained people with disabilities, I was certain there were different perspectives on what they felt was working well, and what areas needed improvement, or in some cases, what was missing. Instead, I was pleasantly surprised to find their advice similar, and quite simple.

In many ways, my conclusions surprised me. First, I was able to define what resources employers really need (and want) to know. In the field of Special Education and transitioning and supporting employment for people with disabilities, it second nature to use the jargon we are used to. This research solidified that employers really need us to get to how will this impact them. They want qualified employees to fulfill their needs. Overtime, I have developed an improved pitch to share with employers. Often times, I share about our mission, our program, the job candidates' skills, etc. From this study, I have learned that what was missing in my approach, was exactly what they wanted to hear, the "bottom line". Frankly, I cannot believe I was indirectly, leaving that out entirely.

Second, the amount of time that some of the employers dedicated to answering their survey was moving. I should have never underestimated the power of feeling valued. This research initiative gave employers a platform to share their experiences and advice for others considering hiring and for those who are currently training/supporting an employee with a disability. That was something I could not have researched—*that* was exactly what I was looking for.

IX. IMPLEMENTATION PLAN

Personally, I am grateful for how this has helped me grow in this field. The information I have explored and learned from this process has had an invaluable impact on me as a teacher, and as an advocate for the employment of people with disabilities. Since I train staff to work directly with the students, I am now able to give them a better

understanding of what the employers are looking for, and what areas they typically need support (and reassurance) in. I am motivated to disseminate this information to fellow employers in our New Jersey community.

I was hopeful in that my initial research outcome was to create a handbook, a product of information to share with employers. I am now very motivated to pull together these results and compile them in such a book, in the most candid, attractive, user-friendly format. Furthermore, I was flattered by the comment one manager shared when I asked how we can spread this information; she sarcastically joked that I needed to single-handedly talk to each on one of them! I am very interested in the idea providing training for employers interested in learning how to infuse this approach in their work setting and to make it as natural and comfortable as hiring any other employee on their team.

Thankfully, in my current role, there is flexibility with such creative ideas, and I am inspired to research grant opportunities to support this next endeavor of supporting employers to hire and retain our students and young adults with disabilities. I feel that is my responsibility to promote public and private programs and organizations improving employment opportunities for people with disabilities, including veterans, students and those who are blind and visually impaired. By meeting with employers and sharing this collection information, it will allow me to provide them with the tools that will only *improve* their business moral. I strongly feel that more people in the community will be able to relate to *why* it is important for all people, including people with disabilities to work. After my efforts, they will be able to learn the next step after they have decided to hire a person with a disability, *how* to make it a success!

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XI. APPENDIX A: Survey**Community Employer Survey**

1. For about how long have you employed/worked with a person with a disability?

- 0-1 Year
- 1-5 years
- 5+ years

2. Did you have prior experience (personal or professional) with people with disabilities before?

- Yes
- No

3. When you were first approached to support an employee/co-worker with a disability, how did you feel? (Please select ALL that apply.)

- Unwilling
- Motivated
- Eager
- Angry
- Nervous
- Annoyed
- Reluctant
- Proud
- Scared/Intimidated
- Inspired
- Other _____

4. Now, that you have experience supporting an employee/co-worker with a disability; how do you feel?

- Unwilling
- Motivated
- Eager
- Angry
- Nervous
- Annoyed
- Reluctant
- Proud
- Scared/Intimidated
- Inspired
- Other _____
- Other _____

5. Why did you/your organization hire person(s) with disabilities?

| <u>Reason:</u> | NOT A priority/ reason to hire | Of priority/ reason to hire | HIGH priority/ reason to hire | Not Sure |
|--|---|--|--|-----------------|
| inside perspective on how to serve customers/clients with disabilities. | | | | |
| greater diversity at the work site so that a wide variety of perspectives are utilized. | | | | |
| high productivity. | | | | |
| high retention rate. | | | | |
| benefit to the community | | | | |
| tax incentives | | | | |

6. Let's be honest; it's NOT "easy"! But, your responses WILL help improve the employment rate for people with disabilities.

Since you successfully employ/support an employee with a disability, what are/have been your biggest "headaches"/day-to-day concerns of your employee/co-worker with a disability: (Please select ALL that apply.)

- Soft skills or Social Skills with colleagues, customers, etc.
- Productivity
- Transportation
- Communicating with the job coach of the individual
- Taking initiative
- Other
- Other

7. Your current employee/co-worker with a disability: (Please determine at what level do you agree with the statements below.)

| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neither Agree nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| has a typical job description and meets expectations. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| has job tasks that are carved out specifically for them to meet THEIR needs. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| has job tasks that are carved out specifically for them to meet EMPLOYERS' needs. | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

8. If/When a concern should arise regarding your employee/co-worker with a disability, who do you reach out to for additional support?

- Individual with a disability
- Parent
- Boss/Manager
- Job Coach
- Teacher
- I am unsure and this has been a problem.
- Other _____
- Other _____

9. Please rate the following information/resources and their importance for successfully supporting an employee with a disability:

| | Not at all Important | Unimportant | Important | Extremely Important |
|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| Transportation Information (<i>ie. Access Link, Public Transportation, etc.</i>) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Accommodations (<i>ideas/techniques to support the individual fulfill their job</i>) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Readily access to job coach, or related support person contact information | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Employer relationship with Job Coach | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Employer relationship with family/caregiver | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Success stories from other employers | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Social Skills/Soft Skills Strategies (<i>techniques to re-direct conversations to being more appropriate for the workplace</i>) | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other <input style="width: 60px; height: 15px;" type="text"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |
| Other <input style="width: 60px; height: 15px;" type="text"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> |

OPTIONAL QUESTION 1:

If you could give advice to someone who is considering hiring someone with a disability, what would you share?

OPTIONAL QUESTION 2:

If you could share some wisdom for someone who was just asked to train or naturally support a co-worker with a disability, what would you tell them?

***"Unless someone like YOU cares a whole awful lot,
Nothing is going to get better. It's not."***
-Dr. Seuss

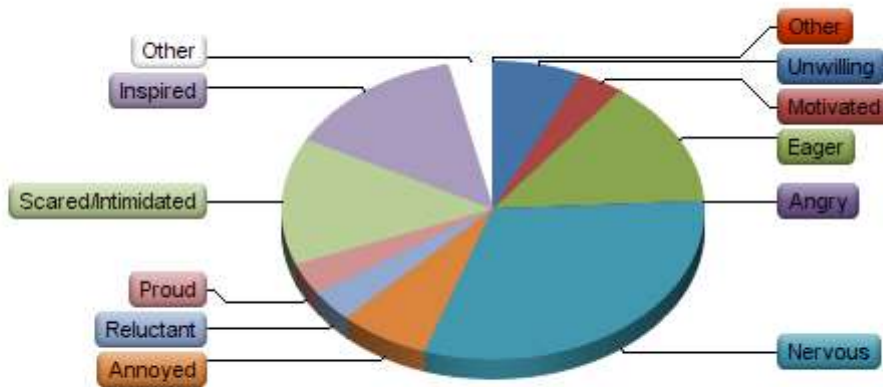
I thank you for your time, expertise and support of employment for people with disabilities.

XII. APPENDIX B. Data Collection Graph

EMPLOYERS' FEELINGS

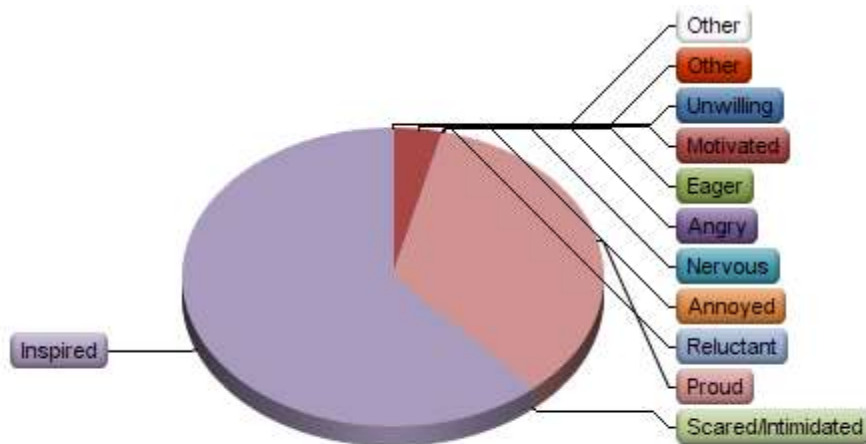
BEFORE

Supporting a Person with a disability at the workplace



AFTER

Supporting a Person with a disability at the workplace



XIII. APPENDIX C. Photographs



Eric is fulfilling a typical task of conditioning the shelves at a community grocery store.



Jessica's tasks were customized. In an office setting, she was asked to file documents according to policy number. This is one (time consuming) task of a typical administrative assistant.



At Trenton Thunder Baseball Stadium, Michael was expected to put together the giveaway items for the upcoming game. This is a customized task that fit both their needs, and Michael's skills.



In this office setting, Angel was providing natural support to assist with the stamping "Received" on an incoming mass mailing.